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Former employees: Amerock had blatant disregard for environment around factory

Posted By [Brandon Reid](#) On September 21, 2011 @ 7:00 am In [Amerock & Water Contamination Series](#), [Local News](#), [News](#), [Rockford News](#) | [3 Comments](#)

Editor's note: This is the third part of a three-part series detailing the effects of pollution created by businesses north of Auburn Street and west of Central Avenue. Part one appeared in the Sept. 7-13 issue, and part two appeared in the Sept. 14-20 issue. The third part details the pollution alleged at Amerock, the largest producer of kitchen and bathroom hardware in North America.

By Richard S. Gubbe
Contributing Writer

From 1956 until 1974, Amerock Co. had a blatant disregard for the waters that flowed in Kent Creek, the land around the factory and the residents who lived there, according to allegations made by former employees.

After hearing from residents in the neighborhood that borders the plant to the west, former Amerock workers confirmed much of the pollution described in the first two parts of this series came from inside the plant.

Through constant, deliberate dumping of toxic chemicals that were used in the home hardware manufacturing plant, *The Rock River Times* has learned by interviewing employees, some of whom were nearby residents, that the pollution was so rampant between 1956 and 1974, the effects are still being felt around the plant at Auburn and Central.

From 1974 until the plant closed six years ago, persistent pollution could allegedly be seen coming from the plant's roof.

Water experts suggest that the result of the improper disposal of plating chemicals and the sludge that plating created can be found in neighborhood wells, a nearby park and the local

community center. For the first 16 years the plant operated as the keystone of the company, employees of Amerock have confirmed suspicions by neighbors that the pollution outside came from inside.

For decades, Amerock was the largest maker of cabinet hardware in the country. At its peak, Amerock employed as many as 1,900 people at the plant. Like many American manufacturing companies that came from modest beginnings, two Swedish immigrants named Reuben and Gedor Aldeen left Rockford's formidable National Lock Co. in 1928 to establish the Aldeen Manufacturing Co. Reuben Aldeen had served on National Lock's management team, and Gedor was the firm's vice president of engineering.

Along with the Aldeens came a select group of other National Lock workers. Together, they comprised what some believe to be the first U.S. manufacturing company to concentrate solely on the production of cabinet hardware.

The new enterprise first rented space on the 12th floor of a 13-story structure on South Main Street known as the William Ziock Building. The equipment used to manufacture products during the company's first year was crude, consisting of porcelain iceboxes and car batteries for plating.

When the 1930s arrived, the company changed its name to American Cabinet Hardware Corp. The company found success in the 1930s, and in 1933, unveiled a line of matching kitchen hardware.

After securing business from Andersen Windows in 1932, sales reached \$3 million by the end of the decade, and expansion was in order. Two more sites in Rockford were opened in the 1940s. The company was a contributor to the war effort and hired many veterans after World War II ended.

In 1953, the Aldeens announced plans to build a \$3 million plant on Auburn Street. Operations at the facilities on Seminary Street and Harrison Avenue would be moved. In 1954, Norris G. Aldeen, who started at the company in 1933 as an apprentice toolmaker, was named vice president of manufacturing.

The company, now Amerock Corporation, opened the new plant in 1956 that included acres of floor space, a 300-seat cafeteria and 1,000 parking spaces for 1,800 workers. A 40,000-square-foot addition came by 1960. More expansion followed in subsequent years.

In February 1965, Norris Aldeen became president. A \$32 million merger with Connecticut-based toolmaker Stanley Works occurred in 1966. In addition to his role at Amerock, Norris Aldeen became vice president of Stanley Works and a member of its board. In 1968, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) filed a complaint charging the merger violated the Clayton Anti-Trust Act and had the potential for cornering the general hardware and cabinet hardware market. Amerock contested the FTC's claim, but to no avail. Yet, more expansion ensued.

Amerock achieved record sales in 1971 from new products and new housing starts. The same year, the FTC instructed Stanley to sell Amerock by 1973. Although Stanley made an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, the high court refused to hear the case. Lancaster, Ohio-based Anchor-Hocking Corp., a manufacturer of kitchenware with sales of \$367 million, acquired Amerock for \$32 million. In 1987, Amerock was purchased by Newell Rubbermaid. Norris Aldeen died in 1997 in Naples, Fla.

In the past decade, Newell Rubbermaid relocated Amerock to Columbia, Md., then to Huntersville, N.C. The name Amerock, a kingpin in the Rockford mecca of manufacturing, was history, except for the complex that remained.

Newell sold the plant on Auburn Street last December to a company that specializes in cleaning up and restoring industrial properties. Denovo Properties, with offices in Chicago and Indianapolis, paid \$2 million for the plant.

Why so little of a price for a property size can be explained by Denovo's existence — to clean up pollution sites without absorbing liability. Denovo specializes in buying "distressed properties and subsequently restores them to commercially viable property," and in many cases, the deals "protect previous owners and operators from future (EPA) claims or defaults," according to its website.

A deluge of pollution

One of the jobs Bob Scroggins and Mike Molander both held in the 1960s and early 1970s was working the plating line. Both also were assigned to clean out the plating tanks.

"There was pretty nasty stuff in the plating department," Scroggins said. "I had to shovel it out of there. We put the sludge in barrels. It was almost like mud, and it was mixed with hardware. It was nasty. There was a lot of cyanide, and you would get burns, and your skin would itch."

Plating is a covering in which a metal is deposited on a conductive surface. Plating is used to decorate objects and for corrosion inhibition, among other things. Many plating baths include cyanides of other metals. These free cyanides facilitate anode corrosion, help to maintain a constant metal ion level and contribute to conductivity. Additionally, nonmetal chemicals such as carbonates and phosphates may be added to increase conductivity.

"I had to pump out the solutions into a tank," Molander said. "I had to get down in those tanks below (the plating line) and get the sludge on the bottom, get rid of the carbonates and the hardware that had fallen off. I had to separate the metal from the sludge. Sludge would go in the metal barrels, and we recycled the metal."

Molander said he would take the 55-gallon barrels of sludge "out in the back ... to the dock at night. When I would come in the next day, they'd be gone."

Geraldine Russell, a 20-year employee who was transferred from the Harrison Avenue plant, walked to work through a gate on the west side of the building that exited onto Alliance Avenue. She walked over trenches of hoses that emptied fluids into and around the creek, one of which remains today. She also remembers walking by many 55-gallon drums of waste that would be there one day and gone the next. Her neighbor and friend on North Johnston Avenue, Bill Moore, was in charge of maintenance in those early years, she said.

"He said, 'I don't feel right doing things I'm doing,'" she recalled Moore saying. "There were 50 or 60 drums in the

back by the dock. He just got rid of them. They dumped them in the back.”

Molander said the drains from the plating line and other machines in the department ran directly into the creek. He also said the gate to the junkyard next door was open until 1971.

“A lot of the foam that was coming out into the creek came from that soap tumbler,” he said. “It looked like laundry mat soap. A lot of those lines from the tumblers drained to the far west wall. That drain went outside. I know that some of those drainage lines (from other machines) ran outside.

“Those (at the creek) came from the building, that’s a fact,” Molander added.

Scroggins also saw hoses that came from the plant.

“They had two hoses that drained into the creek,” Scroggins said.

Scroggins also recalled the barrels on skids in the back of the building.

“There was an open fence to the property next door,” he said, referring to the junkyard that is now the site of the Northwest Community Center and a city park.

“Everybody was told to keep their mouth shut and do their job,” Scroggins said.

A purple haze

Russell, now 73 and residing in Naples, Fla., was brought over to the new plant after it opened, and she ran a plating line that used manual methods of hanging chrome and zinc hardware on racks and dipping them into a plating mixture. She was armed only with gloves.

“All those fumes,” Russell recalled. “There weren’t any exhaust fans. The only time I saw fans was when they was [sic] painting.”

Several former employees, including Scroggins, Molander, Pat Fausett and Tina Bankey, recalled a purple haze above the plating area.

Scroggins, now 62, began working at Amerock in 1967 and worked for six years in the plating department. He ran the plating lines before and after they were updated with improvements.

"We plated without a mask," he recalled.

He and Molander said the haze came from a bad mixture in the plating tanks that happened often and led to evacuations of the plant.

"They cleared the building out pretty fast," Scroggins said.

Molander said there was little training for jobs there, and mixtures of chemicals in the tanks was done by employees, not chemists, until the mid-1970s.

"It really smelled in there," Molander said. "There were no fans at all. Fumes would rise out of the tanks. And I was subjected to that."

Bankey, who worked at Amerock from 1988 to 1995 as a material handler and in plating, said: "I saw clouds of blue smoke in the aisles while using my forklift. I was told 'Don't worry, there's no cyanide there.'"

Fausett worked at Amerock on two occasions, and said even in the later years after fans were installed that a haze could be seen.

"If the blowers stopped working or they had a bad mixture from the plating tanks, they would get a haze and have to have people leave the area," she said.

In poor health

Russell said she is the only one of her friends and neighbors still alive. She has had a triple bypass and other serious illnesses.

"Everyone who worked there is dead," she said. "My legs ache, and my feet have knots in them. I take 10 or 11 pills a

day. All my friends are dead and gone now. Everyone I knew has died.”

Scroggins said: “I wore rubber glove, and the cuffs would get wet. I always had a rash and chemical burns on my arms.”

Molander said the chemicals that remained were quite caustic. “You would get carbonate on your skin,” he said. “It was always on my body. I have cyanide lesions.”

Fausett said quite a few women from the plating line got cancer around the year 2000, and others had breast cancer. “It just seemed weird to us,” she said.

As for Molander, he said, “I don’t have any friends left that were on the shop floor.”

Up on the roof

When blowers were installed in the building, they went to the roof. When it rained, the residual chemicals that came down on the roof from the blowers would go down drain pipes on the sides of the building.

Bankey, who sometimes went up on the roof, said “a silver vapor was coming inside the building.”

Fausett, 53, said the practice continued.

“The roof blowers that used to suck the fumes out of the air went to the roof, then stuff would settle on the roof,” Fausett said.

Molander said when it rained, cyanide went into the creek and around the building from the drain pipes.

“The water on the roof was never treated,” he said. “I don’t know if anyone ever did treat it.”

The ‘Pollution Room’

During the “transition period” from 1972 to 1974 when the company allegedly stopped emptying chemicals into Kent Creek, a “Pollution Room,” or environmental lab, was built inside the plant on the northeast corner.

"When they built it, they were pretty proud of it," Scroggins said.

Molander worked as the pollution control technician after transferring out of plating. He said drains were put in, and the water was neutralized before it was sent down a sewer to the Rockford Sanitary District.

"I would neutralize that water — change cyanide to cyanate," he said. "They can handle cyanate at the Sanitation Department. Anything that was considered waste water was my job. I reconditioned the water, and 100 percent of it came to me. I would record the ph and look at samples."

Molander, now 61, said the lab also would control the plating mixture after hiring a chemist, replacing what he called the "learn by mistake" method. He also was responsible for submitting reports to a supervisor for submission to the newly-formed EPA. He said the City of Rockford would make unannounced visits to test the water before it went into the sewer. Molander also said Amerock hired an industrial hygienist in the mid-'70s.

"The Aldeens were good people," Molander said. "The people who worked for them were not. I think they (upper management) were trying to do the right thing. Their knowledge was limited. The right arm didn't know what the left arm was doing."

Sources for this story included Answers.com ^[1], Chicago Tribune and Newell Rubbermaid.

Family member of Ray Robbel responds to allegations in part two of this series

In a recent article by Richard S. Gubbe in the Sept. 14 edition ["Water expert warns of impending toxic problems"] ... , he states that it had been reported by a Roger Hare that Ray Robel (should be Robbel) of Ray's Appliance was seen dumping "coolant" and Freon in the back of the store. The reporter should try and get the facts straight. Freon is a gas, and it dissipates into the air, and it does not penetrate the soil. It could not be transported in buckets; Freon is under pressure when you purchase it, and when it is in a freezer/air conditioner/refrigerator, it is under pressure and sealed. Freon

is the only coolant used. I have no idea what else he could be referring to. Furthermore, for almost 40 years, there was a well that was used for the drinking water for the apartment and store at this address. Do you really think he would poison his own family?

Hare does not have his facts correct — my husband, Ray Robbel Jr., was also involved in this business, and there was no dumping of chemicals around the former Ray's Appliance building at 4201 Auburn St., Rockford, Ill. Because my husband is still alive, I believe that a correction should be offered and that his name and that of his father's should not be slandered, nor should there be implication that the problems with the water in that area are a result of their business, which was there for 40 years.

Respectfully,

Vixanna S. Robbel

Winnebago, Ill.

Editor's note: *The Rock River Times* regrets the misspelling of Ray Robbel's last name and not making clear that Freon is indeed a gas. However, multiple sources have alleged they witnessed Ray Robbel dump waste from refrigerators and air conditioners on the land behind his refrigerator and air conditioner repair shop.

From the Sept. 21-27, 2011, issue

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